

Regeneration, or the New Birth.

A

S E R M O N,

ON

JOHN iii. 3.



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LONDON:

Sold by BUTTON, CONDER, CHAPMAN, and MATTHEWS: LUCKMAN and SUFFIELD, and MERRIDEW, Coventry.

M,DCC,XCVII.

No. VII.

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THE two grand truths of the christian religion are, our Ruin in Adam, and our Recovery in Christ: and till we know both these, we can perform no duty, nor enjoy any privilege aright; we can neither serve God here, nor enter into his glory hereafter.

You must have observed, that the scripture always divides mankind into two classes—the wicked and the righteous; sinners and saints; believers and unbelievers; heirs of hell and heirs of heaven. These are all mixed together on earth, but they will be separated at the day of judgment; and their eternal state will then be fixed, according to what was their true character here. What then can be of greater importance to us than to know our real state at present? And observe, that though there is that difference between men, which was just mentioned, we are all, by nature, in one and the same condition; that is, sinners, and children of wrath. So that, unless a change passes upon us, we continue in it, live and die in it, and are lost for ever.

This is the solemn truth which Jesus Christ in our text declared to Nicodemus. Perhaps you may like to know who he was, and how Christ came to say this to him. I will tell you. Nicodemus was a great man among the Jews. He was a teacher, and a ruler; and having heard that Jesus Christ had said and
done

done many wonderful things, he came to him one night, being ashamed to come by day-light, and said, " Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God." Jesus Christ directly begins to teach Nicodemus; and he begins with the most important truth that was ever taught—The necessity of the new birth, which he asserts in the strongest manner possible: " Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God:" as if he had said, I, who am the truth itself, assure you, that no man, considering his fallen and corrupt nature, can understand, or enjoy, the blessings of that kingdom of grace which I am come to set up; nor can he enter the kingdom of glory to which it leads, unless his heart is changed by power from above.

It seems that Nicodemus did not rightly understand what our Lord meant by this, at first; and he asked how it could be. But our Lord insists upon it again and again, and we doubt not that Nicodemus came to understand it at last, and really to become a new creature. The Lord grant that we also may become new creatures, so as to serve him here, and enjoy him hereafter!

The *new birth*, signifies, a *great change*, made in the heart of a sinner, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It means, that something is done in us, and for us, which we cannot do for ourselves; something, to which we were before strangers; something, whereby we begin to live, as we did not live before; yea, something, whereby such a life begins, as shall last for ever: for, as by our first birth we are born to die, so, by our second birth, we are born to live for ever.

That we may better understand the new birth, or this change of heart, let us more particularly consider,

I. The

I. The *nature* of this change : and,

II. The *necessity* of it.

I. Let us consider the *nature* of this change. "It is not a change of the substance or faculties of the soul. Sin did not destroy the essence of the soul, but its rectitude ; so, grace does not give a new faculty, but a new quality. It is not destroying the metal, but the old stamp upon it, to imprint a new one. 'Tis not breaking the candlestick, but putting a new light in it. 'Tis a new stringing the instrument, to make new harmony."

It is a *great* change : or else, such a term as "the new birth ;" or, "a new creation ;" or, "a resurrection," would not be proper. When a child is born, its way of existing, and of getting nourishment, is quite different from what it was before : so by the new birth, we live in a very different manner. The greatness of this change is elsewhere described by "passing from darkness to light ;" yea, "by passing from death to life." "You hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins." It makes a man quite the contrary of what he was before ; as contrary as East to West ; North to South ; light to darkness ; flesh to spirit. 'Tis such a change as if a Blackamoor should become white ; or a lion become a lamb. In a word, God takes away the heart of stone, and gives an heart of flesh.

It is an *universal* change—"a new creature ;" a complete creature ; not a monster, with some human parts, and others wanting. It is *God's* work, and therefore perfect in its parts ; though there is room for growth in every part, as in a new-born child. O let us not deceive ourselves with a *partial* change ;

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such as taking up some new opinions ; or joining a new sect ; or leaving off some old sins, and performing some moral or religious duties. The common changes of age and life may occasion some partial alteration ; but this is a change of *the whole man*. In the *understanding* there is light, instead of darkness. In the *will* there is softness, instead of hardness. In the *affections* there is love, instead of enmity.

It is an *inward* change. It will indeed produce an outward change, if the life was before immoral ; but there may be strict morality, without this inward change. Reformation is not Regeneration ; though too often mistaken for it. It is a change of *heart*. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looketh at the heart." God has promised to give his people "a new heart ;" and the penitent Psalmist prays for it—"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Without this there is no true change. "The spring and wheels of a clock must be mended, before the hand of the dial will stand right. It may stand right two hours in the day, when the time of the day comes to it ; but not from any motion or rectitude in itself. So a man may seem, by one or two actions, to be a changed man ; but the inward spring being amiss, 'tis but a deceit." There is a great difference between virtue and religion ; between morality and holiness. Many people abstain from some sins, and perform some duties, for the sake of health, or reputation, or profit ; but, in the new creature there is a change of *principle*. The principle of a new creature is faith ; "faith working by love ;" and this abides. He is not like a clock, that is wound up, and goes only while it is acted upon by the weight ; but, having the Spirit of God

within him, and the life of God in his soul, grace is as “a well of water, springing up unto everlasting life.”

There is in the new creature a change of the *end* he has in view, as well of the *principle* from which he acts. “The glory of God is the end of the new man: *Self* is the end of the old man.” Nothing is a greater evidence of being born again, than to be taken off the old centre of self, and to aim at the glory of God in every thing; whether we eat or drink; whether we are in private or in public; whether we are engaged in religious or in common affairs; to desire, and aim sincerely at, the glory of God; knowing that “we are not our own, but bought with a price, we are to glorify God with our body, soul, and spirit, all which are his.”

That the new birth is such a change as has been described, namely, a *great* change—an *universal* change—and an *inward* change, will still more plainly appear, if you consider the alteration it makes in a person’s views and apprehensions. He has new thoughts of *God*, of *himself*, of the *world*, of *eternity*, of *Jesus Christ*, and of *all divine ordinances*.

He has new thoughts of *God*. Before, he lived, in a great measure, “without God in the world;” without any true knowledge of God; without any proper regard to God; and was ready to think God “altogether such an one as himself.” But now he sees that with God there is “terrible majesty,” perfect purity, strict justice, and that he is indeed greatly to be feared. Now he knows that God’s eye is always upon him; and that if he were to enter into judgment with him he could never stand. But he learns also, from the gospel, that God in Christ, is full of grace,
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and goodness, and love; so that "he fears the Lord and his goodness."

The new creature has very different thoughts of *himself*. He once acted as his own master; followed his own wicked will; was ready to excuse his worst actions; thought lightly of his sins, perhaps gloried in his shame. Now, he sees the evil of his former ways; he mourns sincerely for his sins; he sees the badness of his heart from which they flowed; he ranks himself among the chief of sinners; he wonders at his former boldness in sin; and he wonders more at the patience of God in not cutting him off with some sudden stroke of his judgment. In short, he cries, "Behold, I am vile. I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes!"

The new creature has new thoughts of the *world*; of the *men* of it, and of the *things* of it. Once, he loved the company of profane and unclean persons; now, he shuns them as he would the plague; and his language is, "Depart from me, ye wicked men, for I will keep the commandments of my God." Before, he hated the very sight of a godly person; now his heart unites with those who fear the Lord; he thinks them "the excellent of the earth," wishing to live and die with them. How different also are his views of the things of the world! Once they were his only portion. He sighed to be great; he longed to be rich; he panted for pleasure. Eating and drinking, cards, and plays, and dancing, or some other amusements, were his dear delight; and to enjoy these he would sacrifice every thing. Now he sees the vanity of them all. He sees their danger. They had led him to the brink of ruin; and now he can truly say,

These

These pleasures now no longer please,
 No more delight afford :
 Far from my heart be joys like these,
 Now I have known the Lord !

But O, what new apprehensions has he of *Eternity* ! He hardly ever used to think of it ; now it is almost always on his mind. Now “ he looks not at the things that are seen, for he knows they are temporal ; but at the things which are not seen, for they are eternal.” He knows that he must live for ever ; either in a glorious heaven, or in a dreadful hell. Compared, therefore, with eternal concerns, all worldly things appear as empty shadows, and he considers every thing below according to the relation it bears to his eternal happiness.

The new creature has also very different thoughts of *Jesus Christ* from what he had before. Once he was “ without form and comeliness to him ;” now he appears “ the chief among ten thousand, and altogether lovely.” He did not wish to hear of him, or read of him, or speak of him, except to profane his name. Now he can never hear enough of him, or think highly enough of him ; for he sees, that if ever he is saved, he owes it all to Jesus ; and therefore “ counts all things but loss, that he may know him, and win him, and be found in him.”

He also thinks very differently of *religious ordinances*. He could not bear to keep the sabbath holy. Either he wholly neglected public worship, and took his carnal pleasure ; or if he came, it was a burden : he did not join in prayer ; singing at best was an amusement ; he disregarded the word preached, perhaps derided it ; and as for private prayer, he hated it. How great the change ! Now the sabbath is his delight ;

light ; the house of God his home ; the word of God his food ; the bible his dear companion ; and prayer the breath of his soul.

Thus you see what a change has taken place in his *views* ; and if time permitted, we might shew, that these *new views* are attended with *new affections* ; he loves what before he hated ; he hates what before he loved. He has new desires ; new fears ; new joys ; and new sorrows. He makes new resolutions. He is employed in new labours. He has new entertainments. He has new hopes and prospects. How justly then is he called a new creature !

Having briefly shewn the *nature* of Regeneration, let us consider,

II. *The necessity of it.* Observe how very strongly our Lord asserts it in the text—" Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Surely these words must have great weight with us, if we believe the God of truth. But you will ask, What is meant by the kingdom of God ? I answer, It means the kingdom of grace upon earth, and the kingdom of glory in heaven. Now, without the new birth, no person whatever can see the kingdom of God. It is not said he *may not*, or he *shall not*, but he *cannot* ; it is impossible in the nature of things.

With respect to the gospel state here, in which Christ reigns, no man can be a *true christian* unless he is born again ; he cannot be a true member of the church of Christ, or of that society which is governed by Christ ; he cannot perform any of the *duties* required in this kingdom ; nor can he enjoy any of the *privileges* bestowed in it.

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He cannot perform any of the *duties*. It is "in Christ Jesus we are created to good works." We cannot "pray in the Spirit," till we are "born of the Spirit;" we cannot "sing with grace in our hearts," till we have grace; we cannot "worship God in the spirit," while we are "in the flesh." A dead sinner cannot present "a living sacrifice." The duties of a natural man are lifeless and selfish: "he cannot serve God spiritually, because he is carnal; nor graciously, for he is corrupt; nor vitally, because he is dead; nor freely, for he is enmity against God; nor delightfully, for his heart is alienated; nor sincerely, for his heart is deceit;" nor acceptably, for "he that is in the flesh cannot please God."

In like manner, the unregenerate person cannot enjoy any of the blessed *privileges* of the gospel state. He knows nothing of the joys of salvation. He is a stranger to the peace of the gospel. He has no relish for the sincere milk of the word. He cannot delight in prayer; nor enjoy communion with God, or communion with the saints. And this also makes it plain, that

The unrenewed man cannot see the kingdom of *glory*. The new birth does not indeed intitle a person to heaven; but it makes him "meet for the inheritance of the saints in light." The unrenewed sinner is shut out from heaven by the unalterable determination of God himself, who has declared, that "nothing which defileth" shall enter that holy place, and that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord."

And if you consider what the joys and employments of heaven are, and what the disposition of a sinner is, it will plainly appear that he cannot see the kingdom of God. "The happiness of heaven is holiness; and

to talk of being happy without it, is as great nonsense, as to talk of being well without health, or being saved without salvation." People are ready to think if they go to heaven they must be happy ; but, without a new nature, a man would be as much out of his element in heaven, as a fish, out of the bottom of the sea, would be in a green meadow, or an ox in the bottom of the sea. Can a wicked man, who now hates the godly, expect to be happy among none but saints ? Can he, who cannot keep three hours of the sabbath holy, bear to keep an eternal sabbath ? Can he, who now curses and swears, imagine that his tongue shall be for ever employed in praising God ? Can he, who now hates to think of God, love to employ his mind in the eternal contemplation of him ? No, No. Hell is the sinner's " own place ;" there he will have his own company, and in some measure, his old employments, though without the pleasure of them : but, as to heaven, he can never see it till he is born again.

APPLICATION:

From what was first said of the nature of the new birth, let us learn to avoid the common mistake that baptism is regeneration. It is the sign of it, but not the thing itself. Take not the shadow for the substance. Can baptism change the heart ? Has it changed *yours* ? Say, poor sinner, how is it with you ? Conscience will tell you, " Old things are not passed away ; all things are not become new." Do any of you live in drunkenness, profaneness, sabbath-breaking, whoredom, or any other sin ? Or do you live unconcerned about your soul, careless about salvation, without Christ, without prayer ; know for certain, that you are yet a stranger to this great and blessed change.

And

And yet, without it, the God of truth assures you, it is impossible for you to be saved. You must be born again. O that you may be so deeply convinced of the immediate necessity of this, that you may, ere you sleep this night, fall down on your knees before God, and earnestly desire him to make you a new creature. He can do it in a moment; and he has promised his Holy Spirit to them that ask him. Be advised also to read and hear his word, for this is the instrument which God employs in effecting this change. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

And, as for you, who have experienced this blessed change, forget not to give the glory to God, and to take the comfort of it to yourselves. You are renewed for this very purpose, that you should shew forth his praise. God has made you to differ from the mass of mankind. He has done more for you than if he had made you kings and emperors. Often reflect on your former state; and admire the grace that has made the difference. God has given you his Spirit, and in him, a sure earnest of your heavenly inheritance. "He that wrought you for the self-same thing is God." O be concerned to live and walk as renewed persons; so shall you prove the reality of the change; adorn the gospel; edify your neighbour; and glorify God.